

# The Design of the Building

At the 1935 World's Fair Exposition, plans for the San Diego City and County Administration Building were hailed as a prototype of American civic center architecture. The Civic Center's location on the bay was intended to provide a welcome to seafaring travelers; in keeping with John Nolen's desire that the city make effective use of its natural waterfront, building design assumed an impressive, aesthetic approach that has since remained unparalleled in the construction of government buildings.

## Architecture and ornamentation of exterior

Intended to complement Balboa Park structures, the architecture of the Civic Center is Spanish Revival in style with a strong Beaux Arts classical influence. Architect Samuel Hamill claimed that the initial inspiration for the blueprints came from the Nebraska State Capitol, which had been designed by New York architect Bertram Goodhue. Goodhue had already made a significant impact on San Diego with his designs for the 1915 Pan Pacific Exposition in Balboa Park, which had spawned the popularity of ornate Spanish Revival design in the region.



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The four Civic Center architects had exhibited an affinity for the Spanish Revival form of design through other structures they had designed, and this provided the artistic foundation for their planning. Hamill and his associates softened the classical aspects characteristic of Goodhue's work, adding touches that gave the building more of a southwestern feel: a red Mission tile roof, glazed Franciscan inlaid pottery tile, and arched door and window openings.<sup>50</sup> The building's design also included the authoritative elements of P.W.A. Moderne (with the central office tower symbolizing the efficient business of government) combined with the detail of ZigZag Moderne (evident through the recessed windows in vertical patterns, smooth-surfaced columns, and ample ornamentation).<sup>51</sup>

The exterior of the building is a vast display of intricacy. Exterior concrete walls are covered with a white cement wash that is embellished with 40 separate cast cement figures; consisting mostly of eagles. Large pillars portraying the federal emblem guard the steps of the Civic Center, fusing intricacy with authority by incorporating shields with detailed designs. The tower rising above the entrance is adorned with decora-



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tive tile, as is the inlaid arch above the doors. Such ornamentation was unusual for government buildings. Images on the central panel above the west entrance symbolize the history of San Diego, beginning with the date of discovery and working upward to a fish, a naval vessel, the California tower, and an airplane bearing the date of construction. The County and City seals appear over both the west and east entrances and huge pylons frame the entryways. Cement figures of a battleship, the dove of peace and an old-time clipper ship are set above the pylons. Inscriptions grace the entrances: on the western side, "The Noblest Motive is the Public Good," and to the east, "Good Government Demands the Intelligent Interest of Every Citizen."<sup>52</sup>



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## Interior adornments



WPA grants allowed for the use of marble, bronze and mahogany to give the interior of the Civic Center building a polished appearance. The main and second floor lobbies display rich Tennessee Roseal and Verde Antique marble walls, bronze elevator doors and bronze detailing around entrance doors and the second floor lobby area. Original light fixtures of wood and glass still remain in these parts of the building. Movable partitions of wood and glass separated offices. Mahogany staircase handrails extend from the basement to the top of the tower and at the ends of the wings. Most interior woodwork found in offices and hallways of the building is also of Philippine mahogany.<sup>53</sup> The terrazzo floors evidence the extreme attention to detail by which the Civic Center was designed; thin bands of brass were inset between slabs of the stone. Floors in the lobby and corridors are constructed of terrazzo with office space incorporating brown, marbled asphalt tile, which in many cases has been replaced by carpeting. Long, narrow halls and a spacious interior feeling reaffirm the inherent Beaux Arts influence in the structure.

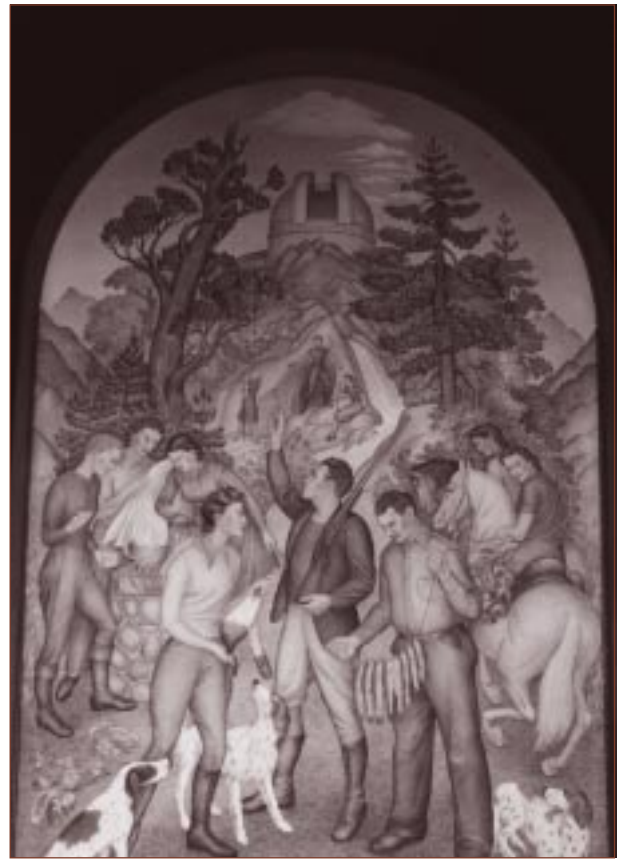


Photos: County of San Diego

# Interior artwork

Some of the most prominent artistic features of the interior of the building are the murals in the County Supervisors' North Chamber and the former City Council Chamber. Murals were considered fashionable for public buildings during the era of Civic Center construction, especially during the Depression as they provided a means for employing local artists. A WPA Federal Art Project commissioned several Southern California artists to create mural panels that would be painted with egg tempera (a water medium used by Italians from the 13th to 15th centuries), which was considered to be the oldest and most durable of all painting mediums. Artists Arthur Ames and Jean Goodwin completed the three County murals. Each depicts a different aspect of life in San Diego County: recreation, agriculture and conservation.

*Right: This is one of three murals featured in the Board of Supervisors' North Chambers.*



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# The County Seal

Architect Samuel Hamill also designed the seal of San Diego County, which was explained in detail by the Board of Supervisors:



The central element of the seal is a double-headed axe rising from a bundle of sticks, which served as a symbol of authority in ancient Rome. Also included in the seal are the stars and stripes of the United States, a stylized dolphin representing the fruits of the sea, and a horn of plenty representing the fruits of the land. A clipper ship

recalls San Diego's historic background of the sea, and the airplane looks into the future. Mt. Palomar Observatory represents a world renowned achievement in science and San Diego's position on

the threshold of scientific history. The observatory overlooks an orange grove, which reflects the agricultural riches of the county. Encircling the seal is the motto "The Noblest Motive is the Public Good"—a quotation from Virgil that was chosen by the Building Committee as the motto to adorn the Civic Center Building.<sup>54</sup>

The choice of this design confused many citizens who did not understand what it was meant to represent. One citizen commented "this emblem which is to adorn the Civic Center... represents nothing in the Heavens above, nor the Earth beneath, but is an object of mirth to you men. Still since it is to cost the taxpayers 1,000 bucks it is nothing to make merry over."<sup>55</sup> Despite such complaints, the Board of Supervisors officially adopted the seal in 1937, replacing an earlier version chosen in 1933. The seal adorned the northern entrance to the Civic Center until the City moved out in 1964, when it was also placed over the southern entrance.



# The Guardian of Water

The “Guardian of Water” sculpture fountain on the harbor side of the building began as a separate project prior to completion of the Civic Center. Local resident Helen Towle willed more than \$30,000 to the San Diego Fine Arts Society, \$6,000 of which could be used exclusively for purchasing “works of art of a permanent nature, to be given to the people of San Diego.”<sup>56</sup> It was decided that the funds would be best put toward the creation of a public sculpture. The Works Progress Administration supplied the remaining \$14,000 necessary to fund a commissioned sculpture by prominent local artist Donal Hord.

In July 1937, a 22-ton granite block from a Lakeside quarry was delivered to Hord’s studio. Hord labored over the sculpture for two years, shaping the block into a figure of a pioneer woman holding a water jug, symbolic of San Diego’s guardianship over one of its most precious resources: water.

Mosaic tiles, also designed by Hord, cover the base of the statue. The mosaic symbolizes clouds in the form of kneeling nudes, who pour water from jars over a dam which flows into a conventionalized citrus fruit orchard. Shapes of dolphins and fish were carved into the interior basin, measuring 17 feet, 6 inches in diameter. The circumference of the basin bears a design of sea snails. When asked to explain the meaning behind the mosaic patterns, Hord claimed that it was his



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*Prominent sculptor Donal Hord carved intricate details into the statue’s tiled base.*

idea to produce these different areas almost as though a pebble were dropped in the water; the water first coming from the clouds, giving life to the land, then spilling over into the sea, which was represented by fish forms, and finally ending on a shoreline in the drawing of sea snails.<sup>57</sup> The combined statue and base rise 22 feet, 3 inches, with the statue itself reaching a height of 13 feet, 3 inches. The “Guardian of Water” was dedicated on June 10, 1939, in a ceremony at the new Civic Center.

Interesting to note from the history of the “Guardian of Water” was the general confusion regarding the ethnicity of the woman featured in the statue. During the its construction, complaints were voiced by the Native Daughters of the Golden West, a group of women who felt the statue represented a person of Aztec descent rather than an American pioneer. These women contended that “since Aztec civilization was not endemic to San Diego or California, we feel that the proposed statue is not suitable and would create a wrong impression so that the public would be misled relative to historical facts.”<sup>58</sup> In response to the protest, a preview of the statue was arranged by WPA Art Supervisor Thyrsis Field to silence skeptics; Chairman John Siebert of the Civic Center building committee ended the controversy by expressing his approval of the statue.<sup>59</sup> Officials endorsed the features of the pioneer woman and defended the sculpture as an appropriate symbol of the spirit of water conservation.

In 1960 a replica of “Guardian of Water” was sent to Yokohama, Japan as a gift from the San Diego-Yokohama Friendship Commission and emphasizing the sculpture’s significance in San Diego history. Hord’s work remains a source of regional pride and a tribute to fine arts.

Mechanical difficulties plagued the fountain in the early 1990s. The water was turned off for five years, but the majestic fountain was restored in early 1996.



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# Layout of the grounds

Initially, the Civic Center grounds included mostly donated plants, including an array of species such as Birds of Paradise, Japanese cherry trees and twenty-six Washingtonia palms. But the grounds were not receiving the care they needed; that became apparent when the palms trees started dying. A landscape architect was hired to oversee the completion of the grounds in 1938 and finished a year later. The entire landscaping project cost \$129,944 (of which \$100,000 was funded by the WPA). On the eve of its 50th anniversary, a national historic site nomination form described the 1939 grounds as follows:

Various varieties of palm trees, varnish trees, Australian tea-trees, podocarpus, and scarlet bottlebrush were planted. Shrubs such as natal plum and windmill jasmine were embedded. Annuals such as calendulas and jobelias surrounded east-facing borders. Scotch and German marigolds filled the borders around the north parking lot. Flower beds of schizanthus, snapdragon, stock daisies, pansies and petunias surrounded the building and when they died out, they were replaced with zinnias, carnations,



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*With heightened awareness about water conservation, a low-water-use garden was installed in the 1980s.*

gypsophila, asters and ornamental dahlias. All annuals, under the supervision of head gardener, Pietro Farina, were developed from seed in a county-owned lath house.<sup>60</sup>

The grounds of the building served as a figurative window into the state of the County. The disorder of the original landscape reflected the challenges of a new site, which was then modified to exhibit the grandeur of yet another WPA project. In 1943, during World War II, Victory Garden beets were grown in the flower beds lining the eastern side of the Civic Center; the vegetables were donated to the Convalescent Children's Aid Society in San Diego. Cabbages were planted on the western side of the building for the same purpose, demonstrating how united San Diegans felt under the common apprehensions of wartime America.

New palms and other varieties of trees, shrubs and flowering plants have been added over the decades, but the overall aesthetics of the layout design still prevail. During the 1980s, a heightened awareness for water conservation led to the exchange of some green for cement. The County installed a low-use water demonstration garden on the east side of the complex in 1984 to serve as an example of xeriscape techniques for local landowners to utilize. The garden made use of indigenous plants and others that adapted well to San Diego's semi-arid climate. Half a century after its completion, the grounds fuse the initial luxuriance of WPA-era splendor with the contemporary demand for water conservation.



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